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ABSTRACT

The Roosevelt University Humanities Enrichment Program tries to acknowledge the adult part of adult literacy. Its instructional materials are of interest and value to the adult student and, therefore, provide incentives for reading and discussion instead of serving merely as skill-building exercises. The materials are drawn from literature, history, architecture, and anthropology and are presented by humanist scholars. The students are all Illinois Public Aid recipients, about 97 percent are Black, and about 80 percent are female heads of households. The program's first year was developed around the following four themes: "Cityscapes," "Looking for America," "Lives of Women and Children," and "Heroes and Outlaws." "Cityscapes" is a good example of how the themes were turned into adult education courses. This 5-week course involved two architects, a historian, materials and strategies developed by a reading specialist, newspaper articles, and a walking tour. As with the other themes, this one was begun by identifying familiar aspects of the subject area. Then a degree of generalization and abstraction was introduced in the presentations and reading materials. Finally, there was an experience (the walking tour) that provided concreteness to which the familiarities and abstractions could be applied. Program evaluation was accomplished by student questionnaires and narratives, written by the humanists, describing the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Student responses were very positive. (CML)

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RETHINKING ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS:

A HUMANITIES-BASED CURRICULUM

The Roosevelt University Humanities Enrichment Program has attempted from the outset to address a problem which has been of concern in the field of adult literacy for some time--that is, the quality of the curriculum for adult literacy programs. The curriculum for Adult Basic and GED programs is largely determined by the books selected for use in the programs--books which reflect a "bottom up" or skills oriented view of reading. With few exceptions, these materials were developed for use by elementary and secondary students in remedial reading classes. The format of the books follows a pattern familiar to most of us since our early school years--vocabulary and word recognition exercises, a reading passage, and comprehension questions, often followed by more vocabulary and word recognition practice. While the reading passages may offer new information, they are aimed at skills development, and are not designed to engage an adult either intellectually or emotionally, although intellectual and emotional satisfaction are among the primary reasons literate adults choose to read.

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Our purpose was to create a program in which materials of interest and value to the adult students would provide incentives for reading and discussion. To put it simply, we wanted to acknowledge the adult part of adult literacy.

We turned to the humanities for these materials--for subjects of social, cultural, and historical interest--and to senior university humanists, who would not only help us formulate the program, but who would interact directly with the literacy students. Each subject area--or theme--in the program included reading materials selected from a variety of sources, strategies and materials developed by reading specialists for teachers and tutors to use with the students, and class sessions where the humanists worked directly with the adult students. We drew from the humanities disciplines of literature, history, architecture, and anthropolgy in developing the content of the enrichment program.

In the meetings which occured between the students and the humanists scholars, we asked that the humanists present materials and ideas which they found personally exciting and with which they were professionally involved. Our conviction was that their expertise and enthusiasm would serve as an additional incentive to the adult students and give the new ideas and concepts with which the students were

dealing a personal dimension. We were also concerned with altering the literacy class model, displacing, at least in part, the grade school context which is implicit in skills instruction using remedial, elementary texts with a university model, a model we believe to be much more suited to the age and maturity of our students.

The population served by Roosevelt University's adult literacy classes and by the Humanities Enrichment Program will be familiar to many of you. All students are Illinois of Public Aid recipients. Most live in public housing, and many reside in projects that are generally regarded as among the nation's most troubled. About 97% of the students are Black, and approximately 80% are female heads-of-households.

Our literacy programs are offered at two sites. Several GED classes are held at Roosevelt University's downtown campus. However, most of the GED classes and all of the Adult Basic classes meet in the basement of Visitation Church which is located on Chicago's southside. Students in the Adult Basic classes receive their primary instruction through peer tutoring. The Humanities Enrichment Program has been implemented at both sites.

To reconceptualize the curriculum of Roosevelt University's adult literacy programs, we formed a team which included teachers and directors of the University's literacy

programs, professors whose area of expertise is reading and language arts, and writers and scholars from the humanities. The humanities scholars were recruited from five major universities in the Chicago area. We identified objectives, selected content from the humanities, and submitted a successful grant proposal to the Illinois Humanities Council. The Humanities Enrichment Program is now in its second year.

One of the major goals of the program is to enable adults to take greater control over their own learning by offering them ways of extending their own educational experiences beyond the confines of literacy classes. Since many of the adult students state as a reason for entering literacy classes the desire to provide for a better future for their children, the concepts, content, and learning experiences developed for the humanities program were selected not only for their potential for enriching the lives of the adults, but also because what the adults learned in the program could be shared by them with their families, thus serving to enrich the lives of their children, as well.

In the first year, the program was developed around four themes: Cityscapes; Looking for America; Lives of Women and Children; and Heroes and Outlaws. Cityscapes

involved the adults in examining the evolution of neighborhoods on Chicago's southside and in considering what the constructed environment, that is, buildings, tell us about ourselves and what we value. Two architects and a historian worked with us on Cityscapes. Looking for America engaged the adults in examining historical and contemporary issues from the perspectives of different ethnic and racial groups. Two historians and a cultural anthropologist worked with us on this theme. Lives of Women and Children focused on the changing role of women and included cross-cultural comparisons of the roles of women and children and the effects of sex-role stereotyping. A historian, a specialist in African-American literature, and a cultural anthropologist worked with us on Lives of Women and Children. Heroes and Outlaws involved the adults in assessing the effects on their own lives and on the society in general of a range of extraordinary individuals, many of whom were initially regarded by mainstream, middle class society as people who were operating outside the law. For this theme we worked with a novelist, a poet, and a specialist in African-American culture.

I am going to describe briefly how the program looks in action by telling some of the things we did with the theme, Cityscapes. We developed a five week unit around

Cityscapes for the GED classes which meet at Roosevelt's downtown campus. The campus is located in a historic landmark building (Louis Sullivan's Auditorium Theatre Building) and is surrounded by other buildings of historic and architectural importance.

As I mentioned previously, we worked with two architects and a historian in developing the content for Cityscapes. As instructional materials, we used excerpts and maps from a book, Chicago: A Historical Guide to the Neighborhoods, which had been co-authored by the historian working with us, slides furnished by the two architects, newspaper articles about the efforts of a Black community on Chicago's southside to attain landmark status, and excerpts from a series of books developed many years earlier by a team of architects as a way of introducing architectural concepts and concerns to a lay audience.

A university reading specialist developed materials and strategies to be used by the GED teachers in expanding the students' understanding of vocabulary and concepts and in involving the students in reading and writing about the theme, Cityscapes. The unit was initiated by having the historian work directly with the GED students. He discussed the neighborhoods and buildings the students passed on their daily trips to the University while showing slides of

particular buildings and architectural details. The session ended with the historian conducting a walking tour of the neighborhood and important buildings in the immediate vacinity of the University. GED teachers continued exploring the ideas which had been introduced by incorporating into their lesson plans the materials and strategies which had been developed as followup work by the reading specialist.

About two weeks later, the second speaker, an award-winning architect, who is also the Dean of Art and Architecture at the University of Illinois in Chicago, met with the students. He used slides as he talked with students about how a building can either contribute to or diminish the quality of life in an urban environment. [In the presentation following mine, you will have an opportunity of seeing the followup materials developed for use after this architect's meeting with the students.]

The final event of this thematic unit involved another architect, Charles Smith, one of the city's relatively few Black architects, accompanying the students on a walking tour of a historic landmark neighborhood in which 99% of the residents are Black. In preparation for the trip students had read and discussed with their teachers a brief history of the neighborhood, which had been written by the historian who had met with them earlier. They had also read and

discussed newspaper articles about a controversy involving plans by the Illinois Sports Authority to construct new housing in the neighborhood. Charles Smith, who had been active in assisting the neighborhood petition for landmark status and in renovating several of the landmark homes in the area, had arranged for us to meet in the community room of a funeral home in the neighborhood and talk with several members of the community before beginning the tour. I confess to some reservations about the plans which had been made. One concern was that the students would not be comfortable with the idea of meeting at a funeral home. There was concern also that a meeting between our students, who were all on public aid, and the neighborhood residents, who were largely upper-income and professional, might result in a measure of discomfort for both groups.

When the students heard where we were to meet and that we would be greeted by the owner of the funeral home, they were extremely pleased. A few of the students treated me with unexpected deference; later I learned that they had thought I was the one with the influence to arrange the meeting. As it turned out, the funeral home was well known to the students and had been owned by the same prominent southside family for generations. The current owner, a man in his 80s, is a highly respected member of the Black community and the students looked forward to meeting him.

Attendance by the students on the day of the tour was very high. The day began with brief comments by our host at the funeral home about the history of the neighborhood over the past 100 years, and continued with brief talks by several area residents about their reasons for staying in the neighborhood, renovating buildings, and reclaiming the area. We were then invited to take refreshments before beginning our tour. The refreshments included finger sandwiches and elaborate desserts, wines, tea and coffee--all laid out on two very long tables covered with white damask cloths and bouquets of spring flowers. As we ate and drank in preparation for the walk, the neighborhood representatives went from group to group, introducing themselves and offering a personal welcome to each of the students.

The tour was one of the most memorable events of the first year of the program. Charles Smith's discussions of the architectural features on the buildings we were seeing were frequently interrupted by neighborhood representatives, who were accompanying us on the tour, as they pointed out that their own homes were just a block up or right around the corner and that if we didn't mind a little mess they would be delighted to show us around. In all, we were invited into six homes that day. There were students who said it was one of the best times they had ever had.

Apart from the unexpected graciousness of the neighborhood tour, the work for the Cityscapes theme followed the model used for all of the themes. Each began by identifying familiar aspects of the subject area (nearby buildings and well-known neighborhoods in Cityscapes). Then, a degree of generalization and abstraction was introduced in the humanists' presentations and in reading materials. Finally, there was an experience, like the neighborhood tour, that could give the ideas which had been read and discussed a new and informed concreteness, to which both the initial familiarities and the acquired abstractions could be applied.

We evaluated the unit on Cityscapes in the same way we evaluated other parts of the program, by having students respond to questionnaires which included both forced choice responses and open-ended statements and by asking the participating humanists, the historian and two architects, to provide a narrative addressing what they perceived to be the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

The evaluations of Cityscapes by the literacy students were extremely positive, with almost all (more than 90%) of the participants responding that they had learned new ways

of thinking about Chicago, its neighborhoods, and its buildings, and almost all responding that they had discussed with friends or family what they had learned. One item on the questionnaire asked students to list anything more they would be interested in learning. Several students requested more information about "buildings and neighborhoods of the past," and about why architectural styles change. A number of responses revealed an increased awareness and interest in construction and design--"how buildings were built," and how architects " feel behind the work they do" were among the things students wanted to learn.

Another item on the questionnaire asked students what they thought was the best thing about the unit. The responses here indicated the development of new and exciting kinds of perception. One student described seeing the "fine art and handwork on buildings," and another wrote,"Now when I walk downtown I look up because there are so many designs on the buildings that can have your mind thinking all the time."

For this unit and for the other eight units of study so far completed the responses of the humanists to working with the adult literacy students have been unanimously enthusiastic, with some calling it one of the most stimulating teaching experiences of their career. All of the humanists working with us on the program--writers,

anthropologists, literature professors, historians, and architects-- have commented on the eagerness of the students, their ability to focus on complex issues, and their willingness to engage in areas of important discussion with candor and intelligence.

The essential conviction of the humanities enrichment program is that the humanities can and should become an effective part of adult literacy programs, offering the adults not only new and personally relevant areas for reading and writing, but providing new dimensions of thinking and awareness, as well. The confirmation found in the students' written and verbal comments about both the general purposes of the program and the specific objectives for each of the program's themes substantiates that conviction.